

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH MAJOR GENERAL KEVIN BERGNER,
SPOKESMAN AND DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF, STRATEGIC EFFECTS MULTINATIONAL FORCE IRAQ
VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 10:00 A.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20,
2007

Copyright (c) 2007 by Federal News Service, Inc., Ste. 500 1000 Vermont Avenue,
NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not
affiliated with the federal government. No portion of this transcript may be
copied, sold or retransmitted without the written authority of Federal News
Service, Inc. Copyright is not claimed as to any part of the original work
prepared by a United States government officer or employee as a part of that
person's official duties. For information on subscribing to the FNS Internet
Service, please visit <http://www.fednews.com> or call (202)347-1400

(Note: Please refer to www.defendamerica.mil for more information.)

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): General
Bergner, welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable. On the line with us we've got
Andrew Lubin with ON Point, David Axe with Defense Tech and others, Ward Carroll
with Military.com, Bruce McQuain with QandO blog.

So, sir, whenever you're ready -- you've got an opening statement for
us?

GEN. BERGNER: I'm ready when you guys are.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

GEN. BERGNER: And I'm not sure, Jack. Are we already connected or
not? MR. HOLT: Yes, sir, we are.

GEN. BERGNER: Okay. So these guys are all on.

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir.

GEN. BERGNER: Okay. And I don't know how much of today's press
conference anyone had a chance to hear, but I'll just give a brief summary, and
then I'll be glad to amplify on specific points that there's interest in.

We announced today that coalition forces had killed Abu Yaqub al-
Masri, who was an important al Qaeda figure in the Baghdad area. He was also
known as Zakaria (sp) or the Doctor.

He had been a senior al Qaeda terrorist in Anbar province before
becoming the emir of Taji, and he had then run al Qaeda's terrorist operations
in and around Baghdad. He had actually directed attacks specifically to incite
sectarian violence. And in that regard, we know he was the primary architect
behind the November car bomb attacks in Sadr City here that killed over 180
Iraqis and wounded nearly 250 more.

So he was a -- he was Egyptian, originally. He had come to Iraq after
fighting in Afghanistan. And he was yet another of the foreign terrorists
operating here as part of al Qaeda in Iraq.

Earlier this week we had also announced the capture of Abu Khamis, who was involved in the assassination Sheikh Sattar in Anbar province. So we are continuing to focus precision raids against the al Qaeda leadership in a variety of places in Iraq.

We are also making progress in a variety of other places. In Baqubah -- you know, this is a place in June and July where we were -- we talked a great deal about the offensive operations underway. We continued with offensive operations in Diyala province but we're also now seeing things: gas stations reopening, new gas stations being created and fuel deliveries that are beginning to better meet the needs of the citizens of Diyala province.

We're also seeing a steady commitment to the Iraqi security forces, and that includes places like Tormea, which is, has been and continues to be the scene of some tough fighting. Over 1,000 citizens there have now volunteered to join the security forces. Some 500 reported to the police recruiting drive there just last week. In -- west of Yusufiyah, down in Multinational Division Center's area of operations, Iraqi police recruiting drives brought out hundreds of Iraqis who want to serve their local security forces as well. So in that case, two drives resulted in over 650 people undertaking the different tests necessary.

In Southern Iraq, the Nasiriyah water treatment plant in Dhi Qar province was completed. This project is going to deliver some 10,000 cubic meters of clean water to the residents of Nasiriyah and the additional communities in Dhi Qar province. And it's a three-year project and one of the largest water projects undertaken in Iraq to date, which will significantly improve the availability of clean water to the citizens of Iraq in the southern part of the country.

I had a chance to visit Mosul on Saturday and saw firsthand some of the improvements that the 2nd Iraqi Army Division and the 3rd Iraqi Army Division are achieving in Nineveh province. And just last week, soldiers from the 2nd Iraqi Army Division there successfully interdicted a suicide bomber, kept him from getting to his target and protected both the Iraqi citizens and their own forces in the process of that. So significant progress in Mosul as well, and there's still a lot of work yet to do there.

And I guess I would finish by saying that while we see that Iraq remains a violent place, and there are many problems and challenges still facing the Iraqi people, it does continue to be a less violent place today than it was last winter. And you look at just since the surge of operations began 13 weeks ago -- the number of overall security incidents throughout Iraq has been on a downward trend and is now at the lowest level of incidents since March of 2006. And if you looked at the total number of attacks on a weekly basis against Iraqi citizens, against Iraqi forces and on the coalition, they have also declined for eight straight weeks and are at a level that we haven't seen since January of '04.

So -- I'm sorry, they -- that's the longest sustained downward trend that we have seen since January of 2004, not the lowest level. So some encouraging trends and signs of progress, although I think all of us would caveat that by saying the levels of violence continue to be too high, and we still have much more work to do. And I -- with that, I will be glad to take your questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, thank you very much.

Andrew Lubin, you were first online. Why don't you get us started?

Q Great, thanks.

General, Andrew Lubin from ON Point. Good afternoon, sir.

GEN. BERGNER: Hello, Andrew.

Q Good, thanks.

General, we're reading in the past -- to switch gears, to go up north a bit, we're hearing a lot in the last two weeks about the Iranian artillery shelling the North, the Kurds and the peshmerga, working on the Kurds -- (off mike) -- into Iran, villagers moving back five and six kilometers from the border. Can you tell us what's happening as far as up in the North between the Iranians and the Kurds/Iraqis?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, this has been something that's of concern to the government of Iraq and that they have continued to express their concerns about. And there's a terrorist organization up there that's been the focus of the Iranian action. It's called PJAK.

And we do not have forces there, Andrew.

Q Okay.

GEN. BERGNER: And so my ability to give you a firsthand account is limited by that.

Q Okay.

GEN. BERGNER: But I will tell you that it continues to be an issue that the government of Iraq is very concerned about.

Q Okay, well, has the government put any troops up there, or are they using the peshmerga to respond? GEN. BERGNER: It's not a -- it's a situation by the press accounting where there is a cross-border engagement using artillery fire, as opposed to a ground force capability. So I think that their use of forces is not directly relevant to dealing with the problem that they've got. But I think it is one where the government of Iraq has to engage the government of Iran to get them to respect the sovereignty and respect the border.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, David Axe.

Q General, this is David Axe with the Aviation Week group.

GEN. BERGNER: Hello, David.

Q How much does it really matter that we kill individual al Qaeda in Iraq leadership? I mean, can't they just be replaced?

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah, well, on a couple of levels, it is important.

And I would say first of all, their ability to sustain operations, their ability to command and control these different cells and maintain a coherent network is significantly affected by the changes in leadership and the attacks on their leadership. And the fact that this pressure continues and that they -- means that they will also spend an additional amount of their organizational time and their own energy on a force protection level, which perhaps they wouldn't have otherwise had to do.

So it is disruptive, it does have an effect on the coherence of the network, and it does have an effect on their ability to sustain their efforts. There's no question that they will seek to regenerate and (install ?) new people to take off -- to take over those positions. And so we continue to go after them and make that regenerative process difficult as well. And when they designate someone, we continue to keep the pressure on whoever is newly designated. That does have over time an effect on the network itself.

Q But is it worth it? I mean, we've seen in the past nine months or so a trend towards coalition forces adopting a population defense strategy. Does that -- is there tension between that strategy and the attempts to go out and kill al Qaeda leadership?

GEN. BERGNER: I don't think there's a tension. In fact, I think it's a -- maybe a complementary relationship, where those efforts to improve population security are enabled, they're enhanced by our ability to target the networks and the individual leaders who we know would otherwise be involved in trying to incite sectarian violence, conduct spectacular attacks that we have seen become their trademark. And so the simultaneous effort in both places is actually very important to achieving that goal of population security.

Q Okay, thanks.

MR. HOLT: And Bruce McQuain.

Q Hi, General. Bruce McQuain with Q&O.net. Congratulations on your recent promotion, by the way.

GEN. BERGNER: Thank you very much.

Q I just wanted to ask a question about this -- the rumblings we're hearing about -- I guess for lack of a better term, a Shi'a awakening, much like what happened in the Sunni portions of Anbar and that type thing. Can you give us a little background on that?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, I think the most important aspect of that discussion is the local solutions that we're starting to see come forward to the local problems facing the Iraqi people. So to the degree that those happen, both in Sunni and Shi'a areas, has a helpful effect on the overall security situation that can be achieved here with the Iraqi people.

We have seen in mixed areas where Sunni and Shi'a sheikhs have come together and committed to a similar kind of awakening, even -- and it is a multi-backed commitment. And so the idea that you would see some similar kinds of commitments in Shi'a neighborhoods is one that's consistent with what we're seeing the Iraqi people do.

Q What kind of pressure, if any, is this putting on the central government?

GEN. BERGNER: I'm not sure how much I would call it pressure as opposed to it's an important -- it's important for the central government to support those local citizens and to work with them to achieve the objectives they have at the local level. And it's actually providing some momentum and opportunities for the central government to reach out and address the needs of all the communities of Iraq, not just Sunni, Shi'a, not just Arab or Kurd, and deal with local leaders who want to see progress at the local level.

And so it's -- in many respects, I would tell you it's an important opportunity for the government to reinforce success at the local level. And I see them doing that, both in Anbar -- they're working that same objective in Diyala, they're working on that objective in different districts of Baghdad, to include Abu Ghraib, and they're working on that now increasingly in southern parts of Iraq as well.

MR. HOLT: Terrific, thank you.

And Ward Carroll? Q Hi, General, Ward Carroll of Military.com and Defense Tech. Thanks for joining --

GEN. BERGNER: Hello, Ward.

Q I really appreciate it. I'd like to ask two things.

First, I wonder if you could give us greater detail around this latest takedown to include the intel fusion that allotted to come together, and then I'd like to pony on David's question because I also believe that the appearance to the general public is these sorts of things are relatively episodic and that the vacuum is easily filled.

So where does -- because I imagine in my mind's eye that somewhere you guys have a room that looks like something out of LA Confidential with, you know, a bunch of pictures and now there's a big X over the doctor's face. So do you know or do you have a strong sense of who would go in there, and how does his takedown -- how is it relative to your timeline for the complete dismantling of al Qaeda?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, that's a -- boy, that's a lot of big questions -- (laughs) -- all organized together. Let me --

Q That's me. I'm a big question guy.

GEN. BERGNER: Let me take on a couple of them, if I could.

The fusion between operations and intel is an important feature of our efforts here, and it's one that's complemented both by the work that conventional forces are doing in working with the local citizens and the local security forces because they are increasingly the source of actionable intelligence and are an important enabler. And then the relationship that those conventional forces have with our higher-end special forces is an important one because they enable each other as well, both in terms of precision operations that can be conducted and in terms of the support and intelligence that's developed from the conventional forces.

Q So is that what happened in this case? Can you give us any specifics around this particular takedown?

GEN. BERGNER: That happens in so many cases, and it's just sort of a normal feature of our operations in Iraq. In this case, I don't really have anymore -- (word inaudible) -- about the specific details of Abu Yaqub al-Masri's operation and the interdiction there. But I would tell you that the major feature of this is about the local people; it's the intelligence and the support that they are providing both the security -- their own security forces and ours. That is the central feature that is enabling the progress that's being achieved in addition to our ability to simultaneously put pressure not only in Baghdad itself, but in the belt surrounding Baghdad, which is -- which was a key feature of this operation. This guy was operating from the -- (off mike) -- and conducting operations -- or directing operations from there.

Q So when you talk about local security channel, are you talking about their willingness now to provide information to American forces about what's going on in their villages regarding al Qaeda?

GEN. BERGNER: That's right and to their own forces, and to work with their security forces and ours to be vigilant, to help identify who's coming and going, and help us -- you know, there's nothing like a local citizen who knows who's supposed to be here and who's not.

And so their involvement and their confidence in their own security forces and their confidence in us is really critical to this, and the result is that actionable intelligence directing us to weapons caches or to information that'll help us op targets or networks.

Q So was this a joint takedown or was it solely American execution?

GEN. BERGNER: This was a coalition forces operation, and it was enabled by intelligence from all those different facets that I described.

Q So there were Iraqi forces present when the takedown happened?

GEN. BERGNER: I cannot confirm that for you. It was a coalition operation, but I will get back to you on whether or not there were Iraqis specifically involved in that. But it was -- what I meant by it was enabled was -- is I meant that information and the intelligence was enabled by the local people as well.

Q So back to David's question, how does this fit on your timeline for success or is there such a thing, or is it just sort of a shoot-look-shoot sort of way forward?

GEN. BERGNER: I'm not sure what you mean by a timeline for success.

Q Well, I mean do you have a protracted strategy for dismantling al Qaeda?

GEN. BERGNER: We have a -- you know, a key part of our operations is targeting al Qaeda-in-Iraq networks, their safe havens, their operating bases and simultaneously placing pressure in all of those places. We focus on the foreign terrorist facilitators. We focus on the media cells and the propaganda generation that comes from those. We focus on the regional or geographic mirrors as they call themselves, and we focus on the functional leaders, who do things like coordinate sniper operations or others who coordinate bomb-making or VBIED-making operations. And so our focus is one that is both geographic and

functional. It is both at the network and at the support that that network has to derive its capabilities from.

And so I guess my answer to your question is it is a very multifaceted approach to reducing al Qaeda threat, and it is one that's very much dependent and important to have the Iraqi commitment to.

And you saw in Anbar province ultimately it was the choice made by the people of Anbar, the tribal leaders being the leaders of that. But it was the people of Anbar who rejected al Qaeda and decided to take a stand, and that's what's enabled the great change out there and the effectiveness of our operations against the network out there.

Q So is -- again, is time one of their variables in the plan, or is that not really something that you're fusing in there?

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah, there isn't a specific timeline that's part of this. It's focused on the effects that we're trying to achieve and certainly being enabled by this surge of operations that is currently under way.

Q Okay. Thank you, General.

GEN. BERGNER: Thanks.

MR. HOLT: And a few minutes left here. Any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah. General, this is Charlie Quidnunc at the Wizbang Podcast. I have a question about the operational readiness assessment. There was some statements that General Petraeus made in his House and Senate hearings that operational readiness assessment number 1 and 2 don't necessarily indicate that an Iraqi security force could not participate. How do you guys make a decision about whether they do or don't participate in or lead their efforts?

GEN. BERGNER: Well -- (chuckles) -- that's a -- that's -- let me kind of start on a larger scale and point out that those assessments and that framework is intended to provide a common basis for the Iraqi leadership, security leadership, and the coalition leadership, to focus our efforts. And so it's -- and in that respect, it serves a very important purpose, because it gives us a common framework to coordinate ourselves and to establish priorities and to work towards improvements in whatever it might be, whether it's personnel, manning -- (inaudible) -- equipment, whether it be training or whether it be the leadership that's necessary for each of these units. And so it does have an important aspect in terms of helping us work together towards the goal of improving the capability of security forces.

And the point that I think was being made is, there are units that may not have exactly the number of trucks they're supposed to have or the number of sergeants they're supposed to have, but they're very capable, nonetheless, of performing during missions. So we don't dismiss at all the importance of fulfilling those manning requirements or helping the Iraqis fulfill the equipping requirements, but we also look at the overall capability of the unit and their capacity to fight. And what you see is, you see units is in many -- in some cases may lack certain enablers, but because of the strength of their leadership or because of other advantages or the other capabilities the unit has, they're still able to go out there and perform quite well.

So it's -- I guess what I'm pointing to is there is an overarching holistic assessment that military leaders make about their overall capability. But we still are -- we still use the ORA as it's intended, which is a framework to help drive our prioritization and our overall efforts to build their capability. I think that's the point --

Q So they can still fail their bench audit and yet be a good participant in the effort. (Pause.)

MR. HOLT: Hey, Charlie, you want to repeat that again?

GEN. BERGNER: I'm sorry.

Q Sorry. So sorry. They still fail --

GEN. BERGNER: I can barely hear whoever's talking.

Q I'm sorry. They could still fail a bench audit and yet still be a participant.

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah, they can still be short or lacking in a certain area but be capable of performing and accomplishing an element of the mission. So I think that's the point that was being made.

MR. HOLT: All right. And any other follow up questions? Just a couple minutes left.

Q Hey, General, how's morale? You know, a lot of what Senator Webb asked General Petraeus was around the OPTEMPO, 1 to 1 sort of thing. So what's your sense -- I know you're not the resource provider, but what's your sense of the morale?

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah. I spent last Saturday up in Mosul with a bunch of soldiers from the 4th Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division. But the troops that I was riding with were on their second tour and were part of a Military Police unit. I've got to tell you, I couldn't have been more impressed. And I had served in Mosul in 2005 myself. I couldn't have been more impressed with their discipline, with their capability and with the pride that they had because they described for me, in their own words, what they had seen happen over the last 13 and a half months now that they've been up there doing a really tough mission.

I spent a day not too long ago down in Dura market with soldiers from the 4th Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, who likewise were -- as we walked around and talked to the Iraqis and to the Iraqi soldiers, they gave me their own characterization of how things were going there. And that's a place where al Qaeda continues to press back and is trying to undo the progress that's being achieved. And they had a great sense of that. They had a great sense of what it would take, and they were absolutely mission-focused.

So my answer to you would be, I, for one, know how hard this is, on them and on their families, and what a burden that they are bearing, but you can't help but be inspired when you talk to these guys either, because they not only are absolutely expert in what they're doing, but they're absolutely proud of what they're accomplishing. So, that's how I would characterize it. And I would say that it's absolutely asking a huge amount of our forces and their families. Every chance you get to say thanks, I suspect you guys do, and it means a lot to them when you do.

Q Do you think this is sustainable for the out years?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, you know, we know that this surge of forces is going to -- is going to end. I mean, it's temporary in nature. So we know that this particularly intense period is something that we will transition from, as General Petraeus described in his testimony. And what progress we're able to achieve, sustained progress on the security front, and what the Iraqis are able to achieve on the political front, I think will be the key things that characterize how we would answer your question. We hope that those levels of progress can be achieved on scales that will further reduce the burden on our troops and our forces.

Q Okay. Thanks, General.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you, sir, Major General Kevin Bergner, deputy chief of staff, Strategic Effects, Multinational Force-Iraq.

Sir, do you have any closing comments for us?

GEN. BERGNER: You know, I think I would probably have closed with what I just said about our troops. You can't help but be inspired every time you're out with them and you see what they're doing in some -- one of the most difficult and complex environments. And they are sustaining an enormous commitment to this fight. So I would just say we all thank them, and we thank you for your support of them.

Thank you guys very much. Thank you, Jack.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir. Thank you for joining us, and we look forward to speaking with you again. We really appreciate it. Major General Kevin J. Bergner with us on the Bloggers Roundtable. Q Thanks, General.

GEN. BERGNER: Thanks you all.

END.